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Sacred Politics: Is Heaven Closed to the Wretched of the Earth?

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Abstract. This article explores the political and religious implications of a decision by the leaders of a religious institution for many of its followers and the appeal of the religion itself.

The Holy Synod, the day-to-day ruling body of the Russian Orthodox Church has nominated Russia's last czar, Nicholas II, his wife, Alexandra, and their five children for canonization as martyrs. The czar and his family were shot to death by Communist guards on July 17, 1918. Four family servants who also were murdered that night are not being considered for canonization. Rationales for this split decision seem to be as controversial as for that after a championship boxing match.

One might argue that the czar and his family were the "real reason" for the murders and thus are the "real" martyrs. However, martyrdom is not essentially focused on who the primary victims are but the psychology of murdered and the murdered.

For example, a martyr may be someone who willingly suffers death rather than renounce a religion. Yet, the czar and his family were murdered irrespective of religious faith, religious identification, or the option of renouncing them. A martyr also may be someone who is put to death on behalf of any belief, principle, or cause that they espouse or support. Yet, the czar and his family were murdered regardless of what they believed. If anything, the murders related to various beliefs of those political authorities initiating orders to the murderers.

A martyr also may be someone who undergoes severe suffering regardless of the cause or who seeks sympathy or attention by pretending to suffer experience or by exaggerating suffering. As to undergoing severe suffering, one might argue that both royalty and servants suffered equally because they all were murdered. Or one might argue that royalty suffered more because they fell farther in life than their servants--from controlling the fates of others to having their fates controlled and their lives ended by others. If the latter is the case, the murder of royalty should be viewed more seriously than that of servants and a strong ethical and moral case can be made for developing more severe penalties for murderers of royalty, more comprehensive and effective means of preventing such murders, and more opportunities for mounting a stairway to heaven.

One might also argue that the czar's servants suffered more than the czar and his family because, in essence, the former died for being in the wrong place in the wrong time, for doing what they had to do to survive, for being pawns in a time of terrible political and social turmoil, even for nothing save some existential arbitrariness and absurdity. On second thought, however, all this might apply to the czar and his family as well.

It is too facile, but, perhaps, ineluctably accurate, to conclude that the sacred split decision is reflecting either a class and/or political bias. The class bias of a religious institution favoring the wealthy who can materially support that institution is an old story in religious history--one that supports anti-clericalism, religious disestablishmentarianism, and, perversely, other approaches to class bias such as that of those directing the Communist murderers. The political bias of a religious institution making a sacred decision

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by secular criteria in a new political context--viz., a post-Communist era--stands the sacred on its head through the formal keepers of the sacred flame. Meanwhile, the wretched of the earth continue to place their faith in something holy--faith that in spite of themselves becomes the ultimate in false consciousness. (See A move to canonize the czar. (July 20, 2000). The New York Times, p. A4; Greeley, A. (1994). A religious revival in Russia? *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 33, 253-272; Kears, M. C., & Rinaldi, A. (1983). The political uses of the dead as symbols in contemporary civil religions. *Social Forces*, 61, 693-708; Kuo, Z-Y., & Lam, Y-H. (1968). Chinese religious behavior and the deification of Mao-Tse-Tung. *Psychological Record*, 18, 455-468; Ringer, B. B., & Glock, C. Y. (1954). The political role of the church as defined by its parishioners. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 18, 337-347; Russian Orthodox Church at <http://www.russian-orthodox-church.org.ru/en.htm>; Williams, R. H. (1996). Religion as political resource: Culture or ideology? *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 35, 368-378.) (Keywords: Canonization, Czar, False Consciousness, Religion, Russian Orthodox Church.)